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Introduction to Research Notes: "Faits Malaccomplis and the Origins of Crisis"; and "Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis."

In the space of a week in October, 1962, the leaders of the two superpowers--neither of them adequately warned by their intelligence and policymaking apparatus, the two largest in world history--each presented the other with a stunning and mutually dangerous surprise.

How could this happen?

The same question arose in August, 1990. The five-month Gulf Crisis that led to the Iraq War in 1991 began with a comparable pair of surprises for two opposing leaders: one the president of a superpower, the other the head of an oil-producing state and recent purchaser of the "third most technically sophisticated armed forces in the world."

As in 1962, an unforeseen and surprisingly reckless challenge--unlike before, clearcut aggression--was followed by an equally unforeseen and surprisingly reckless US response: indeed, the same response as in the previous case, a naval blockade accompanied by massive preparations for airstrike and invasion. (These were the only two instances of such a course in the postwar era).

The parallels do not stop there. On October 9, 1990, I wrote a memo listing the following characteristics of the Gulf Crisis as of that moment, every one of which, word for word, applied as well to the Cuban Missile Crisis as of late October, 1962:

"1. US warships are intercepting and searching, at gunpoint, ships of other nations on the high seas, implementing a US-initiated blockade.

2. The US is assembling, with all possible speed, a massive, offensively-oriented airstrike and invasion force of bombers, carrier and amphibious task forces and ground combat divisions, to support attack options ranging from "surgical airstrikes" to full-scale invasion against the country being blockaded.

3. The declared aim of the blockade and of the increasingly-explicit threats of air and ground offensives is to force the country being blockaded and threatened to reverse and to withdraw to its own territory a deployment of its armed forces contrary to American interests and security.

4. This aim, and the blockade supporting it, has the endorsement of a majority of a regional organization of which the

targeted country is a member (and also--in 1990 though not in 1962--of all the permanent members and nearly all of the other members of the Security Council of the UN and of the General Assembly).

5. It is generally assumed (though not officially declared) that the airstrike and invasion force being built up has other aims as well: ousting the leadership and regime of the country being targeted and destroying its military capability. The existence of these incentives to attack, strongly argued within the US, strengthens the credibility of the threat implied by the buildup.

6. These more ambitious goals--which go well beyond restoring the status quo ante--have not been endorsed by any regional association nor by the UN, nor have the offensive military means that would be necessary to achieve them. A unilateral US offensive would, on the contrary, almost surely be condemned by most states in the region, whose very stability would be threatened by the anti-American emotions such a US intervention would arouse in their own populations.

Nevertheless, US-initiated war appears very likely if the announced US and multilateral demands to restore the status quo ante are not met soon.

7. Congressional elections are coming up in one month. Political calculations--not only of implications for the imminent Congressional elections but for the Presidential election two years off--saturate every comparison of "options," though this is never acknowledged.

8. Prior to the onset of the crisis there was pressure by the opposition party to apply sanctions to the country now being blockaded, with the President resisting such proposals: both before and after the threatening surprise deployment, this Administration policy was described by its domestic opposition as "appeasement."

9. Hence--along with a total failure of the Administration to foresee the military moves threatening US interests, and Administration acceptance of deceptive assurances--the Administration was politically vulnerable when it was caught by surprise. If it had done nothing, it would have suffered in November elections and in the Presidential race two years later both from this passivity and failure, from having failed to foresee or forestall the move, and from imputed gullibility and weakness.

10. The deception came from someone who, while far from a formal ally, was being regarded as to some extent a partner in shaping events, or at least someone whose private word could be trusted. Public accusations of "lying" figured prominently in the President's surprisingly strong response.

11. The strength and speed of the President's countermoves--and of Allied and international support for them--were as

surprising to most observers as the initial provocation, and totally unforeseen by the adversary.

12. If war comes in the near future, it will probably be deliberately initiated by the US, its demands and threats having not met with success.

13. However, there is a significant possibility of a loss of control by one side or the other--unauthorized action by subordinates, false alarms, accidents, misinterpreted or misattributed incidents, misinterpretation of alerts or reconnaissance--leading to an all-out "response" or preemption by the other side.

14. Moreover, a third party (in this case, Israel) might trigger all-out hostilities by its own misinterpretations, loss of control, or "defensive" actions (as Cuba came close to doing, by its antiaircraft fire in 1962) unauthorized by its major ally.

15. The decision-making process is dominated almost exclusively by the Executive Branch, with no decision-making role for Congress, or Allies: the crisis is seen, with a good deal of reality, as a duel between two individuals, the President and an opposing dictator."

Another analogy could have started that list: both crises began with an attempted fait accompli, which led to a dangerous military crisis instead of to passive resistance by the US and its allies. (This was the nature, in each case, of the pair of surprises that constituted the crisis).

And each of them, of course, led to a spectacular US success, in terms the President defined and the country accepted: by far the two most dramatic US victories of the postwar era. To look critically, to question American decisions in these two cases--of all that might be looked at!--is to argue with success.

But there are times when that needs to be done, and more than ever, this seems to be one. We can all be thankful that many of the dangers that seemed to loom were not realized, though others were, catastrophically; and in retrospect, most of the fears seem to have been well-founded, reflecting genuine risks.

Moreover, as months go by, there seems less and less basis for any belief that this was the war to end war, or the last such crisis. Nor should anyone be content alone with the Lessons of Iraq that the Pentagon learns, and teaches, or with the selling of a new Iraq Syndrome to replace the skeptical Vietnam model.

The list of parallels above--rather impressive, it seems to me, for a pair of episodes I have seen nowhere else compared--seems adequate to make the case that an effort to learn lessons from either one will do well to make a comparative study.



In my October memo, I suggested: "My own best understanding of the Cuban Crisis, much more than the conventional, currently-accepted accounts, reveals possible parallels beyond the surface ones that could explain a number of puzzling aspects of the present situation," starting with: "how the crisis arose, on both sides, including the surprising potential for mutual surprise, and the multiple consequences of attempting a fait accompli."

The two draft research notes that accompany this memo address precisely these questions. The thoughts on faits accomplis, in particular, draw on research and draft notes of mine that go back to 1964, and years in-between. As I wrote in October:

"My 1964 study of the Cuban Missile Crisis along with certain much less serious crises that shared certain common characteristics with it--the U-2 crisis of 1960, Suez, the Skybolt crisis of 1962--led me to identify a particular, complex and precise crisis-pattern such that one could predict and explain a great variety of sequential and associated phenomena from a few initial circumstances.

"I called my description of these phenomena and how they hung together: "Faits Malaccomplis and the Origins of Crisis." By the term "Faits Malaccomplis" I referred to attempts at a fait accompli that, for one reason or another, failed to achieve the specific effects sought; in failing, I discovered, these abortive efforts often generated crises, to the surprise of both parties. The Cuban Missile Crisis seemed to me the most significant example of this class of crises: until this fall."

The real power and rewards of this abstract model, I believe, remain to be demonstrated in its application to the full details of the Cuban Missile Crisis--many of which have never been reported--and to a number of other crises to which I allude briefly in this overview. These comprehensive analyses and comparisons of the crises--including the escalation of the Vietnam War, 1964-65--remain to be presented, along with several other aspects of a conceptual framework.

\cmc\Hampson  
June 17, 1991

Notes on Fen Osler Hampson, "The Divided Decision-Maker,"  
International Security Winter 1984-85, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 130-165

(See note in \cmc\themes, June 17, 1991)

I think of JFK as "creating" a national security crisis (rather than K); but this is as seen by many of the insiders on the ExComm, led by McNamara (and probably the President). Or rather: they may never have seen it consciously that way, but that reflected denial; their own evaluation of the situation clearly implied that. As McN said, "This is not a military problem, it's a domestic political problem," based as much on what JFK had said as on anything K had done.

But that was not the case for the Republican challengers in the election campaign, who were already defining the Soviet non-nuclear buildup on Cuba as a national security problem, calling for a military response: a blockade if not an invasion. They could certainly be counted on to claim that missiles constituted a major national security problem, both for political reasons and because they simply did not agree with McNamara, JFK or McG. (They saw matters more like the JCS, Nitze or Dillon). From their perspective, K had unequivocally created the national security crisis.

At the same time, they were unaware of JFK's Mongoose program--as both a provocation and evidence of JFK's concern and activism--or invasion preparations. (These bear on who initiated what the Soviets call the "Caribbean Crisis.") (Compare the public's ignorance--and perhaps JFK's, in detail--of the preparations of the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration for Cuba I, during the election campaign of 1960).

Suppose--what no one has ever hypothesised--that Khrushchev had moved MRBMs to Cuba in October, 1960--as he could have done! and as he talked about doing only a few months later, in the spring of 1961!--after Nixon had taken a soft line in the debates and had argued against the legality of US intervention in Cuba! The parallel to the Missile Crisis would have been exact, given the relative positions of the Administration and the challenger!

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What I believe K expected JFK to do in October 1962--keep the Soviet missiles secret, if he discovered them, till after the Congressional elections--was exactly what Nixon intended to do about the Soviet sub base at Cienfuegos in August, 1970! He was thwarted in this by an "inadvertent" leak by a Pentagon press officer (really "inadvertent"?! This is exactly what JFK would have expected in 1962! Check accounts: was this not an attempt to

force Nixon's hand, based on suspicion either of him or perhaps of Kissinger?). Even then, Nixon used "quiet diplomacy": exactly what K would have expected from JFK. So my (and now Beschloss's) hypothesis about K's possible expectations in 1962 amounts to imagining that K hoped and expected that JFK would behave as Nixon (who, but for false voting in 1960 would have been in JFK's place in 1962) actually did behave 8 years later.

However, K may have not understood the differences in context in the two cases: in particular, the effect on US politics of K's own prior buildup of Soviet materiel in Cuba in 1962, leading to a JFK warning and salience in the 1962 election campaign (as in 1960): all this on top of the Republican-Democratic history on the issue of 1960-61. (There is a new Evans and Novak story of two weeks ago about the possibility of SS-20s in Cuba. Now that Castro may again be a salient target, after Iraq, could this whole issue come back?!)

Hampson compares JFK's handling of the missile crisis in 1962 to Nixon's of Cienfuegos in 1970. Compare LBJ's reaction to news of night attacks in the Tonkin Gulf in August of 1964 and in September, 1964!

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See important marginal notes on article!